

“Wanted: Dead or Alive”

Scripture: Romans 14:1-12

Graphic: Wanted poster, food, Sabbath days,

Key Verses: 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's

Theme: Each believer is wanted by God as member/agent of the Kingdom of God. If we spend all our time divided, as a church, then we will not be effective as a church. If Jesus is Lord, then unify under the Lordship of Jesus, to give witness to the reign of God for a lost and broken world.

1) Introduction

- a) I want to try to say this message in a sentence: In order for the church to stand as a testimony to something larger than the world around us, we must be united under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and let **NOTHING ELSE** hinder that pursuit.
- b) Each believer in Christ is wanted by God to be an agent of that pursuit...to operate in our lives as people who are willing to focus our attention of Christ, and not on the petty and annoying differences that we have. When we do that, then the world will bow together to Jesus when judgment day comes.
- c) And let me just say that for those who were waiting this morning to hear a message about the 10-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I have something even better. As we wrap up this walk through the middle part of the Book of Romans, we hear a statement from Paul about the ultimate hope we have in Jesus Christ. As we do that, be thinking about the significance of a day like today for America, knowing that the Kingdom of God transcends this nation. And the Lordship of Jesus Christ is the transforming power that all the nations of the world need more than anything else.
- d) So turn with me to Romans, chapter 14, and let's submit to the truth of God's word for us today...
- e) Let's pray...
- f) In 1872, a poster was circulated in Missouri that read, “Wanted: Dead or Alive.” This poster was for an outlaw named Jesse James. His brother Frank had one just like it. These two men were part of a ruthless gang that was charged with robbery and murder. They robbed banks and stage

coaches and people's houses. They had a significant reward on their heads and were being tracked closely by law and the governor of Missouri.

- g) They were wanted men because of what they'd done! The governor wanted to bring them to justice for their illegal actions.
- h) God has a wanted poster with your name on it. "Who, me????!!!" "I haven't done anything wrong!" Um..INCORRECT. Romans 3:23 reminds us, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And when the Bible says ALL it means ALL.
- i) You are wanted by God. But I would suggest to us this morning that the mechanism by which God brings us to justice for our sin, and the purpose of God's judgment, is vastly different than the mechanism by which the governor of Missouri attempted to bring Jesse and Frank James to justice.
- j) See Jesse James was murdered by a fellow gang member in 1882, and brought to justice by his death.
- k) In our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, justice has been served already through Him, and our sentence is to live our lives as ambassadors for Christ in everything we do.
- l) Unfortunately, we sometimes lose our focus and get caught up in worrying more about what the person next to us is doing, and forget the main goal to serve Christ. Let's turn to Romans 14 to see what Paul has to say to the Roman Christians...

2) Scripture

a) Read verses 1-4

- i) Apparently, the Roman Church had some issues! There were things that were distracting them from the unified mission to make disciple for Jesus Christ.
- ii) And these things were not issues of doctrine or theology, really. They were cultural issues for the people that made up the Roman Church.
- iii) Here's some background to help us. Really briefly, Paul is writing this letter sometime around 51 A.D. In 49 A.D., the Roman emperor Claudius had temporarily banished a large number of Roman Jews, in part because of the considerable disturbances plaguing their synagogues

- over the issue of one "Chrestus." Historians generally agree that this "Chrestus" was indeed the message of Christ as it rippled through the Jewish community. By 51 A.D., however, Roman Jews were once again invited back into the city. This influx of a strong Jewish presence challenged the Jewish/Gentile identity of the new Christian communities within Rome.
- iv) What that did was to increase the desire for some of the Christians in Rome to distance themselves from their Jewish and Gentile roots. But not everyone. Some people were still holding onto the customs and traditions they grew up with, while others were finding their new freedom in Christ.
 - v) It's no different from today when we bring people with diverse backgrounds and cultures into one Christian setting. We kind of expect that there will be some things that we disagree about...some different perspectives and practices.
 - vi) Now, one of the things that some of the Jewish Christians didn't want to do was eat meat that had previously been sacrificed to pagan gods. That's fair, right? They grew up in a culture in which anything that had to do with pagan gods was totally forbidden...it was all laid out in the laws in the book of Leviticus. And just to make sure they didn't, a Jewish Christian man (we'll call him Phil – I need a volunteer to be Phil), not only refused to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but refused to eat meat at ALL because he might not KNOW if it came from an idol worshipper or not...
 - vii) Phil and his family were vegetarians because they had such strong convictions, due to of their Jewish upbringing, and they were happy. It wasn't easy, but they were content. That is until dinner time...
 - viii) Phil, eating on the back deck of the house, looks over at brother Bob on the back deck of the house next door, who they worship with at church, and here's Bob (a gentile from Rome – I need a volunteer to be Bob) grilling a huge steak. And just before he got home, Bob went to the market and bought that steak from a vendor who had received it from a pagan guy who offered it to an idol. And see, Bob, doesn't have any problem with eating this steak because he has always eaten these steaks, before and after he became a follower of Christ. Now, BECAUSE of Christ, he believes he has the freedom to continue to eat what he wants,

- because the Bible talks about food in the OT, but clearly in the NT, it doesn't because Jesus completed the law and it's no longer required.
- ix) See the conflict brewing here? Both Christians...both following their cultural convictions...
 - x) Phil is looking with disdain at Bob, condemning him for eating unclean food. And Bob, looking down at Phil, is sort of laughing at him because he is eating vegetables when he could be enjoying meat.
 - xi) And Paul, here, calls Phil and his family weaker in the faith, and Bob and his family stronger in the faith. This is kind of strange because I think it would take a ton more conviction and perseverance to restrict one's diet than to eat whatever you wanted.
 - xii) Just by his words, Paul is in the stronger faith category...he's with Bob...he likes meat. Remember though, he's a Roman Jew...surrounded by Gentiles his whole life.
 - xiii) But here's the whole point...Paul is writing to BOTH OF THEM...both Phil and Bob and saying, neither one of you is wrong! So stop arguing about who is more holy or more devout than the other.
 - xiv) If you are driving along the highway, which has a speed limit of 65 miles per hour, and you are going 65 miles per hour, you aren't breaking the law, right? If you happen to come up behind someone who is going 55 miles per hour – again not breaking any law – and get stuck behind them for a minute, you get annoyed right? I sometimes do.
 - xv) Did I ever stop to think that the person in the car WANTS to go 55 miles per hour? Because it's safer, better on gas mileage, and the person wants to see the view from the car and can enjoy it more at a slower speed? No! I just think the person is inconsiderate, weak, and pokey! And I get around her as fast as I can while resisting the temptation to lay the horn to let her know how foolish she is. (Sorry, I couldn't resist...actually, Stacy drives way faster and more aggressively than I do). And when I do, I get the shaking of the head and fist as I fly by...
 - xvi) Neither person breaking the law, but both thinks the other is doing something awful and bad. In reality, it's all just fine. In the bigger picture, it's just two different ways of driving.

- xvii) The PROBLEM is, now BOTH people are not focused on the road and instead focused on their disgust for the other person. Do you see it?
- xviii) When the Roman Christians got so focused on the things that they didn't like about the other Christians with them, they forgot to be focused on their calling to be Kingdom-builders.
- xix) If there are things in the church that are clearly not sinful, but that two different people have different – albeit very convicted – opinions, those are not things that should divide us. I think of things like style of music, which can really distract us from the main purpose of worship.
- xx) If you are weaker, according to Paul, don't disdain those who are stronger. If you are stronger, don't judge those who are weaker.
- xxi) Ask yourself, "What are the things that I do, or the things that I don't do, in order to avoid doing something I think is wrong, but that someone else might not think is wrong?" What are the things I abstain from that other people do not and how do I feel about those people?
- xxii) If those things are distracting you from the Kingdom work that God is calling you to do, then Paul's message is clear. FOCUS ON THE THINGS THAT MATTER TO GOD.
- xxiii) God will be the one to judge whether or not those things are good or bad. This is not a salvation issue...this is a quality of life issue.
- xxiv) And there was something else...let's read verses 5-6...

b) Read verses 5-6

- i) Same kind of issue came up with which Jewish festival days to observe. Some said, "All, of course...we're Jewish!" Others said, "Dude, none, we're followers of Jesus now and those OT festival days don't have meaning to us."
- ii) Paul writes, "Let each one be convinced in his mind." Basically, Paul is telling them to make sure they know why they are doing what they are doing, no matter WHAT they do."
- iii) And...AND...whatever you DO decide in your minds to do, after prayerfully thinking it through...DO IT TO THE GLORY OF GOD!

- iv) If you want to make every Weds. a day of fasting because you feel God is leading you to do that...then do it for the glory of God. Don't, however, start thinking that other people are LESS holy or convicted or obedient than you because they don't fast, or they fast only once per month. Instead let's talk about fasting and maybe invite each other to try it...and we can ALL do it for the glory of God.
- v) Whatever you do, or don't do, because you are being led TO it by the Holy Spirit, do it for the glory of God and for the sake of Jesus. But don't use it as a way to look at others with disdain. Let God do the judging.
- vi) Look at verse 7...

c) Read verses 7-9

- i) Our lives on earth are made up of the time between our birth and our death. When Paul says "whether we live or whether we die," he's talking about our entire lives.
- ii) We do not live to ourselves...we are given life FROM God and he holds that life in His hands. We are not our own, as much as our culture wants to foster the notion that we somehow are in control of our own destinies. We have freedom of choice, but God is the one that knows every hair on our heads. He has chosen us to be His people.
- iii) And because we are His, we are accountable TO Him. Every believer, no matter who you are or how you express your faith in Him, will be accountable before God on Judgment Day. And it's our ACTIONS that will be the topic of conversation.
- iv) Because of Jesus, it is emphatically not our responsibility to be the judge, because that's His role...HIS responsibility. (REPEAT)
- v) Jesus lived in obedience to the Father and died in obedience to God's plan of salvation so that the judgment you face will have a positive outcome. You didn't do that for the person next to you, Jesus did. And so why do we sometimes think that are qualified to be the judge?
- vi) That's the question Paul asks in verse 10, again...

d) Read verses 10-12

- i) I can see Paul standing before Phil and Bob – who are on opposite sides of the fence that separates their yards, looking them in the eyes, and saying, “Phil...why do you pass judgment on Bob?” And then he turns to Bob and asks, “Bob, why do you despise Phil?” “We will all stand before the judgment seat of God, guys. Instead of being at each other, what can you do together to worship, learn, serve, and love for the sake of the kingdom? Let God take care of each others’ eating habits and convictions about worship style and frequency.”

3) Conclusion

- a) Each one of us is Phil sometimes...each one Bob, Bob’s wife or Phil’s daughter...we have convictions in our lives which we aren’t even aware of before we enter into a finger-wagging session with the people around us.
- b) John Wesley often quoted St. Augustine’s phrase, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”
- c) So often, we focus on the non-essentials, call them essentials, and then waste time thinking about ways to get everyone around us to conform to the non-essentials in our lives.
- d) In order for the church of Jesus Christ to be a witness to the world around us, we must forget about the things that divide us as Christians and worship, learn more about, serve, and give thanks to the One who lived and died as the essential act of love from God.
- e) Everything we do (live, die, and everything in between) should be for the glory of God, no matter where we stand in the large spectrum of freedom in Christ. This isn’t some liberal attempt to draw the circle wide and say, anything goes.
- f) If the things that we are doing are sinful, while we claim salvation in Jesus Christ, and we continue in that, then God may just allow our sin to ruin everything in our lives until we allow Christ to yank us out of it. Sometimes it’s too late to repair the damage, but never too late to give what’s left of the smoldering ruins to Him to rebuild. Identifying our sin and humbling ourselves for repentance is the only pathway God allows us to take so he can do it.
- g) We need brothers and sisters working together for building up the body of Christ and not tearing us down as we struggle.

- h) This is a plea to focus more energy on Jesus Christ and loving our neighbors, than on the non-essential opinions we hold.
- i) Let me finish by saying that in the days that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11, people from around the world came together to mourn the loss of nearly 3,000 people. For a few days, people around the world laid aside their differences and rallied in prayer and responded to a heinous crime of passion.
- j) As Americans, we were, and still are, horrified by the events of that day. As Christians, though, living in the days leading up to the return of Jesus Christ, as painful as those days may have been, it changes nothing in God's ultimate plan for this world and our salvation.
- k) We are wanted by God while we are living, and will stand before Him in judgment someday after Jesus returns.
- l) We could spend our days looking horizontally around us and focus on the things on which we disagree. Or, we can look up and focus on the Lord Jesus Christ.
- m) God wants us to focus on Jesus Christ. I'm thankful that we have a Sunday School here at the Panama UMC so that we all have the opportunity to spend time focusing on Christ every week!
- n) It's only through Him that true freedom, triumph, and salvation can come to this world...one person at a time.
- o) Let's pray...